



Data must be shared to be useful.

Editorial

Environmental Health Information Service

A new service has been established by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS). This new service, called the Environmental Health Information Service (EHIS), has been developed so that the NIEHS can better serve the community of environmental health scientists, regulatory agencies, and the interested public. Through the EHIS, the NIEHS will make available on line its major publications and reports. It is designed to facilitate the dissemination of environmental health information and is, at the same time, an attempt to lower the overall costs to the taxpayer.

The argument for maintaining this outreach is compelling when you consider that environmental health information is useful only when it is shared by the people, institutions, and agencies that are able to make use of it. Scientific data are of little value if they remain buried in laboratory data books. In other words, data must be shared to be useful, and the more widely disseminated they are, the more likely that they will reach audiences for whom the information is meaningful.

The NIEHS serves the environmental health community and the public through its publication of *Environmental Health Perspectives* (EHP). In addition, the National Toxicology Program (NTP), an interagency program centered at the NIEHS, is dedicated to providing credible, science-based toxicological evaluations on substances of public health concern. Communication of those findings to the public, government agencies, and the science community is an essential element of the NTP. This information is of vital interest to those who are concerned with the mechanisms of action of toxic agents, as well as to those who make regulatory decisions on acceptable levels of chemicals in the environment.

EHP is a peer-reviewed scientific journal that publishes high quality scientific articles along with news of the environment. EHP serves the scientific community and there is no favored path to publication. Materials submitted from NIEHS or its grantees are not treated any differently from submissions from outside organizations. The information published in EHP is recognized around the world as being uniformly reliable and of high scientific caliber. Information generated under the NTP is different from that published in EHP. NTP publishes the results of studies carried out under its direction at the NIEHS and its numerous contract laboratories. These publications take the form of technical reports that summarize all that has been learned about the toxicity or carcinogenicity of a compound. There are two kinds of reports published on a regular basis: the results of the long-term or chronic toxicity studies and the short-term or acute studies. These studies are absolutely essential to both regulatory agencies and the chemical industry. Another report widely used by the public and regulatory agencies is the "Report on Carcinogens." The "Report on Carcinogens," which is mandated by Congress, lists agents either known or reasonably anticipated to be human carcinogens. In addition, the NTP maintains databases dedicated to chemical health and safety and rodent historical controls (the historical control databases cover tumor incidence, growth, and survival for Fisher 344/N rats and B6C3F₁ mice and are essential for use in development and design of carcinogenicity studies). All of these items, including EHP and its Supplements, the NTP Technical Reports, and the databases will be made available through the new service.

The EHIS is a subscription service based on the Internet. The information service is being developed by a private contractor, OCR Services, Inc. (Washington, DC). Under the terms of the contract, revenues generated by the contractor as a result of selling subscriptions to the EHIS will be used to reduce the cost of the contract to the government. Basically, the contract is a tightly controlled fixed-price contract that returns all benefits to the government and not to the contractor. For the basic subscription rate, a subscriber is given access to all internet materials. Various levels are available over and above this basic price depending on whether or not subscribers want additional copies of EHP or NTP reports (see subscription forms on page 1024). Subscriptions to EHP alone are available through the Government Printing Office (see page 1137), although NTP materials are not available through GPO, nor is access to the internet site. GPO has always sold subscriptions to EHP, and this service will continue.

There are two main reasons for trying to build the EHIS. First, the world of communication as it exists today is quite different from what it was 10 years ago. Communication is becoming more and more based on the internet. Emphasis on the printed word is changing. For environmental health issues, the internet is an outstanding source of information and an outstanding means of disseminating the materials. Economically, the advantages are obvious. The printed word is expensive to maintain and slow to disseminate. The internet is considerably cheaper and faster. The printed page has been enhanced by the digital computer, and while the printed material will continue with us for a long time to come, more and more information is being disseminated over the internet.

In the past we have distributed many copies of EHP and NTP reports free of charge. For example, members of the U.S. Congress have received free copies of EHP and its Supplements. This service will continue. Overseas we have maintained a program whereby the NIEHS has provided free subscriptions to EHP and its Supplements to many educational or research institutions in developing countries. This program is very important and will continue. Some of the most horrendous environmental problems in the world exist in developing countries as they try to bridge the gap between the economically deprived and the economically comfortable. In many places, EHP is the only source of reliable environmental health information available.

We have always tried to accommodate those who have pleaded special economic circumstances. For example, students will have access to the program at a reduced cost, and those who cannot afford the service will also receive special consideration. Each request for special consideration will be evaluated by the EHIS and decisions made based on need and fairness. We plan further innovations to improve our service to the public and look forward to your comments.

Gary E. R. Hook and George W. Lucier
Editors-in-Chief, EHP